ELEVATING THE PHYSICAL

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The main moral thrust of this week's parsha is the challenge to take the mundane and ordinary and make of it something spiritual, holy and eternal. To our sorrow, we are well aware of how the supposedly holy can be made tawdry, cheap and negative. Thus the challenge of the opposite is truly a daunting one.

Dealing with money, gold and silver, workers, artisans and the like usually inhibits any sense of holiness and eternity. The material always seems to corrupt the spiritual. It is not for naught that there is strong rabbinic opinion that the Third Temple will not be man-made but rather will descend from Heaven completely formed. It is destined to be eternal while the Tabernacle/Mishkan in the desert and both the First and Second Temples were the products of human endeavor and earthly building materials.

All three of these great projects and physical institutions were destroyed and taken from us. Apparently we had failed in the goal of converting the earthly and temporary into the heavenly and eternal. So, if in fact this is the case then why does the Torah spend so much space and employ so many words to describe the physical construction of what, after all, remained only a temporary structure subject to conquest and destruction?

This is a question, which has nagged the brains of all biblical commentators for many centuries. It also poses the problem of this enormous challenge of the spiritual having to deal with the physical and in fact being dependent upon the physical in order to achieve its stated spiritual goal.

Part of the answer to this ongoing problem lies in the attitude of human beings towards the physical wealth that all of us pursue during our lifetime. The Torah wished to teach us that wealth, material goods, human talents and artistic abilities are all only means to an end and not the end itself. One of the great pitfalls of life is elevating the means to be the end.

Thus wealth for the sake of wealth, money for the sake of money, power and influence for the sake of power and influence becomes the norm in much of human society. This by its very nature prevents the transformation of the physical into the holy, the fleeting temporary into the unending eternal.

The true purpose of gold and silver, architectural talent and building skill is to create a place of holiness and a constant reminder of the relationship between the Creator and the created. Therefore this week's parsha emphasizes the importance of donative intent. The Tabernacle/Mishkan was not

to be built from funds gathered by taxation and coercion. Without proper donative intent there is no hope to convert the physical into the spiritual.

Halacha raises the question why we do not recite a blessing before giving one's donation to charity or the support of Torah. Many answers, almost all of them technical, are advanced to solve this question. I am struck by the question itself. For the basis of its being asked is that somehow one must inject holiness into an otherwise ordinary act of money being transferred. How difficult this is if it is not preceded by the recitation of a blessing. Holy intent creates holiness and can transform the material into the spiritual.

Shabbat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein

Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com